



As U.S. Attorney for the state of Colorado, one of my top concerns is working to protect Colorado communities from all types of threats, whether they be active shooters or hate crimes against religious institutions. One of our key focus areas in Colorado has been building resilience within communities to both prevent and respond to threats.

Why? We are living in a markedly different threat environment than we experienced just five years ago. Today, planned attacks have been increasingly less complex, often committed by lone actors who are inspired by violent ideology online, have easy access to weapons, hide their plans from their friends and families, and aim to attack civilians. Whether they are active shooters targeting schools or movie theaters, or those receiving inspiration and direction from overseas terror groups online, it is difficult to detect all of these plots in advance. Robust information sharing amongst government organizations and community leaders has never been more important.

Regrettably, at the same time that this sort of threat has become more difficult to detect, we are also seeing an uptick in backlash incidents against innocent Muslim American and Sikh American communities across the country. The attacks in Paris, France and San Bernardino, California coupled with some national political rhetoric, have contributed to this backlash. Critically, however, attacks are not unique to these faith communities – a shooter in Charleston, South Carolina killed nine worshippers at an African American AME church, a shooter targeted Planned Parenthood here in Colorado, and synagogues rank with mosques as the top targets for hate crimes towards religious centers.

Because lone actors may not be on law enforcement's radar, we need our faith communities to be prepared to respond—both to try and prevent people from becoming radicalized in support of violence, but to also form security plans to respond if attacks do happen, for those crucial minutes before law enforcement arrives.

One very successful initiative to build such resilience has been the Protecting Houses of Worship (PHOW) initiative, where we partner with law enforcement and community leaders from multiple faiths to deliver and share information to interfaith community audiences on how they can better protect their houses of worship from threats. We initiated these PHOW events in Colorado following the devastating attack at the AME Church in Charleston, and we've held five PHOW events in different cities up and down Colorado's Front Range, which have been heavily and enthusiastically attended by a broad array of faith communities.



In the spirit of sharing the information that has proved to be a highly successful program meeting a strongly perceived need in the faith community with our national counterparts, here's a summary of our goals and thinking for these events:

What do we hope to accomplish with PHOW events?

- Encouraging an initial conversation about implementing a security program
- Offering best practices for faith-based security
- Networking, community outreach, and information sharing
- Providing resources, including components of a sound security plan and examples of plans
- Brining community leaders together to respond to community concerns

What are the benefits for law enforcement?

- **Community response can save lives:** PHOW events prepare faith communities for those moments before law enforcement can arrive on the scene. We've seen that if civilians know how to better protect themselves during an incident, lives will be saved. For instance, the students at Virginia Tech who barricaded the door to their classrooms survived in higher numbers. Those that are not prepared are more vulnerable.
- **Building a relationship with your community before an incident happens:** Particularly for crime prevention specialists, it is important to have a trusting relationship with the communities you're serving before an incident happens. If you know them in a time of calm, it will help emergency response go more smoothly.
- **Increasing trust with diverse communities:** Particularly with immigrant and refugee communities, PHOW events build trust. These communities are sometimes fearful of law enforcement, based on past experiences with law enforcement in their home countries, but PHOW events reiterate that American law enforcement officers are committed to serve and protect. Such events with transparent information sharing will establish a trusting relationship to facilitate future discussions about all types of crime prevention.
- **Fostering communication between faith groups:** Faith communities are more prepared when they are connected and communicating. PHOW events can lead to a communication network that will serve everyone in times of crisis.

What are the topics covered at PHOW events?



We organize speakers to cover a variety of topics, followed a Q&A panel with the speakers at the end. Speakers cover:

- Civilian response to active threats, including [run/hide/fight](#) or [avoid/deny/defend](#)
- The nature of threats posed to faith institutions, such as hate crime trends
- Laws pertaining to firearms and their use in self-defense, and specifically laws concerning the carrying of concealed weapons
- Resources available to faith-based organizations developing security plans
- Available help from [DHS](#) and [FEMA's](#) websites

These events are easy to plan and put on if you identify the right mix of subject matter experts. Our team here in Colorado has prepared a detailed guide with more information on how to plan a PHOW event, you can download it [here](#).

We hope that this information can be concretely helpful to any other government or community entity working to protect the community by building expertise and resilience in the community itself.